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A perfect night to hunt for UFOs

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About 5 o'clock Thursday evening, the stars began to make their appearance on a clear horizon. We had gone 18 miles, and civilization's busy roads had given way to the lonely, rural byways of southern New Hampshire.

My guide pulled her car into an abandoned dirt road. "A perfect night," she said, snapping off the headlights. "Visibility is great."

She reached for her binoculars, instructed me to unsheath the pair I had brought along, and, within seconds of our arrival, I was sitting somewhere outside Portsmouth with 65-year-old Betty Hill, watching and waiting for flying saucers.

I know what you'll say. Flying saucers? Come on, Tom. How about a nice Christmas story the Friday before the holiday?

Well, I had to do it. When I called for an interview, what I got was an invitation to adventure. It was like Ted Williams asking you to shag a few fly balls. When Betty Hill invites you for a little saucer-watching, you jump.

You see, Betty and her husband, Barney, who died in 1969, are perhaps the most famous couple to ever experience what experts call "a close encounter of the third kind."

They were taken aboard a spacecraft in 1961, the story goes, examined by a fairly congenial bunch of aliens, and returned unharmed to their car in the wilds of northern New Hampshire.

If you didn't read the 1966 best seller, "Interrupted Journey," you may have seen the TV movie in '75, starring James Earl Jones as Barney and Estelle Parsons as Betty.

What made the story so compelling was that the Hills never divulged what they



UFO WATCHER — Betty Hill poses with her dog and a bust of "Junior" a likeness of one of the aliens she said she and her husband Barney met in 1961. (News Photo by Tom Moroney)

remembered of that September night until several years later.

After Barney's severe bouts with anxiety, they both went to a doctor who used hypnotism to finally draw it out, the amazing details of a few lost hours aboard a spaceship 37½ light years from home.

Betty even reconstructed a map the aliens had shown her. On it were stars scientists had yet to discover. When radio astronomy improved years later, sure enough, they showed up in the exact spot Betty had said.

Journalists and broadcasters from all over the world came to see the Hills. Documentaries were made. Twenty years later, Betty still gets mail and phone calls.

But nothing has ever come close to that night. It was an experience that changed her life, turning her into a steadfast observer of the evening sky.

"There are two rules I have," she said, waving her finger at me. "You cannot tell anyone the location of this landing site, and you must do exactly as you are told."

The aliens were fussy about who they let into their field.

Moments later, she pointed to a small white light just over the trees. "Look," she said, but it disappeared quickly.

"They know we're here?" I asked.

"Sure." In fact, 10 years ago, Betty had a showdown with them. She had been coming to the field weekly, only to be harassed each time by low-diving saucers.

"One night, they came in real close. They burned two holes in the hood of my car, so I got mad. I got out of the car and shook my fist. I said, 'Look, this is my planet, and I'll do what I want. Besides, I may be the only friend you'll ever have.' " They haven't bothered her since.

Things got curiouser and curiouser for us after that point. We drove down the dirt road until we reached a railroad crossing.

There she stopped the car and turned off the headlights. We were in total darkness.

"There they are," she said nonchalantly, pointing to a single white light burning several hundred yards down, right in the middle of the track.

My face and neck tingled in apprehension. Until then, this had been a whimsical interview with a UFO hunter, but when she ever pointed down those tracks to a light, things began to change.

She rolled down her window and called out, "Hello friends. Hello. How are you tonight?"

I was losing my nerve fast. "Who are you talking to?"

She flicked the headlights on and off several times in succession. I looked down the track again and, believe it or not, the light was blinking back. It was as if the thing was answering her.

"What was that?" I stammered.

"Them," she said quietly.

I looked back quickly. The light had gone off.

As we drove away, she explained about railroad tracks. They land on the tracks because the heavy weight of the craft is best supported there. When a train comes along, all they do is rise in the air and hover.

We drove a couple of miles to a small restaurant and ordered up two fried-chicken dinners. People in the restaurant knew Betty well. One woman came over and asked, "Seen any lately?"

When we got up to leave, Betty said, "You ain't seen nothing yet."

Minutes later, we were back at the railroad tracks. The light I had seen before was gone, so we headed up the dirt road until we came to an open field.

I looked into the sky and saw a blinking, silvery light. It was the kind of flash you would get from a continuous photo flash. Then another popped up. When the third came into view, I asked if I could get out of the car.

I walked over to the stone wall and, peering through the binoculars, I saw no fewer than five blinking lights, about 100 yards apart in the sky.

At that precise moment, something moved in the field.

Now it was probably a squirrel, or a mouse, or even a leaf in the wind. It really didn't matter, because under the circumstances, I almost wet my pants.

I bolted for the car and slamming the door, I heard Betty say, "Get in. I didn't want to alarm you, but one just landed in the woods directly behind us."

She turned the car around and waited to see a light go on in the trees, but it never came.

"Well, I guess that's about it for tonight," she said.

It was time to head back. I kept thinking about the five lights. I didn't dream them up, but I also knew Pease Air Force base was right beyond the trees. There had to be some earthly, military explanation.

"Betty, what did we see out there the last time?"

She only smiled.

After a pause, she said, "Fifteen spotted tonight. A little better than mediocre." One night she counted 80.

On our way back, near another empty field, we passed a police car. All the lights were out. The officer inside was looking out the windshield toward the sky.

"What's he doing?" I asked.

"Him? Why he's watching, of course. A lot of folks are watching. You'd be surprised."